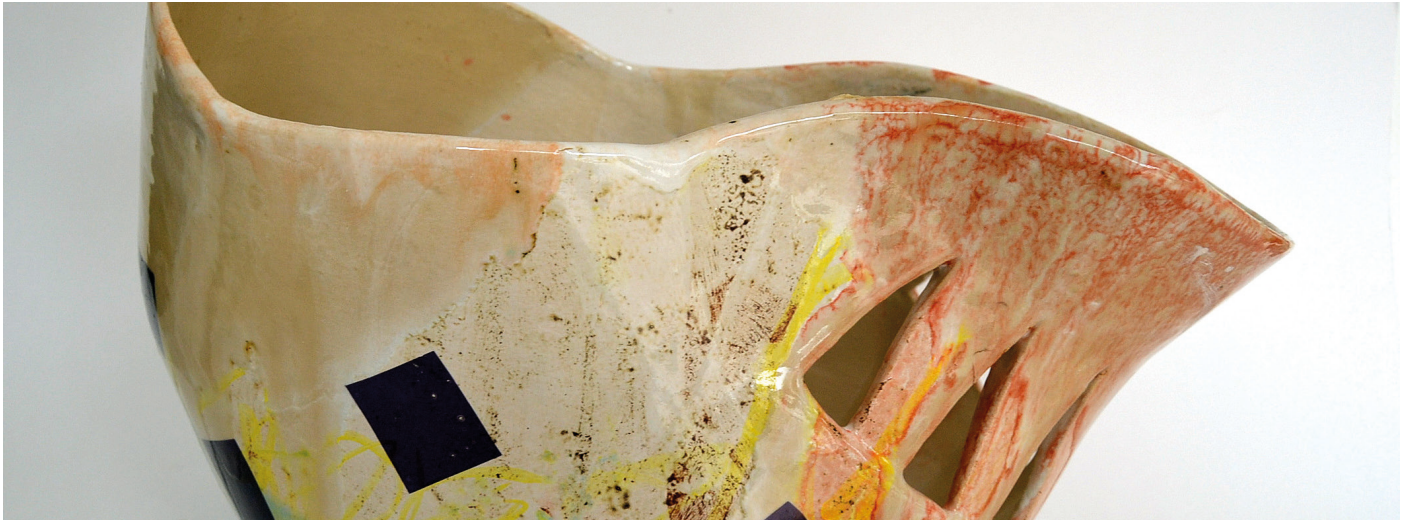


RE-COLLECTION

Ceramics by Tony Briffa

15th April - 8th May

SPACES C1 - C4
ST JAMES CAVALIER
CASTILLE PLACE
VALLETTA
TEL: 2122 3200



Re-Collecting identity through Obsolescence and Reusability

“Obsolescence transforms commodities into raw materials”

Matthew Bakkom

(Artist and Founder of the Canal Street Historical Society, New York, December 2001)

The central concerns on which ceramicist Tony Briffa has founded his most recent work have addressed obsolescence of form and image as opportunity for reusability into new discourse objects, as a reflection on and search for an alternative identity. His core practice has regularly involved a process which disengages the object from its habitual context, and through the reappropriation and reuse of that which is considered outmoded, which has fallen on the wayside, or is frozen in significance through cultural or aesthetic reformation or progress, he rethinks meaning. Obsolescence and reusability therefore become a ploy in order to readdress the purpose and making of a new medium, form or object that although confronting histories and memories, through incongruous alliance give rise to a fascinating cross-breed, which is thrown once more into the dense net of our socio-cultural collective, imbued with a new significance and demanding new intellectual implications.

The process of borrowing in order to contribute new meaning through a recontextualisation of whatever is borrowed has been with us since the early twentieth century, ever since Picasso and Braque appropriated objects from a non-art context into their work and perhaps more forcefully through Duchamp's readymades. Nevertheless, the practice has been not only evident, but also important to much of the artistic output in the decades to follow, and has also been at the core of such movements as the Surrealists, Pop, Fluxus and Conceptual Art, right up to current artistic practices.

Through a similar postmodernist propensity, Tony Briffa invites us to engage with objects that at face value seem utilitarian and mimic the forms of stools, irons and three-legged tables. He presents us with pots that sacrifice functional stability for playful decoration and kitchen-like tile wall pieces that rekindle the pop collages of such artists as Eduardo Paolozzi or Richard Hamilton syncopated by minimalist backgrounds of pure colour and meandering brushstrokes.

In the table pieces, the artist invites us to renegotiate our experiential knowledge of this object of furniture which normally consists of a smooth slab fixed on legs, through an intervention on scale and firmness of function. Furthermore, he re-evaluates and forces new meaning by donning it with

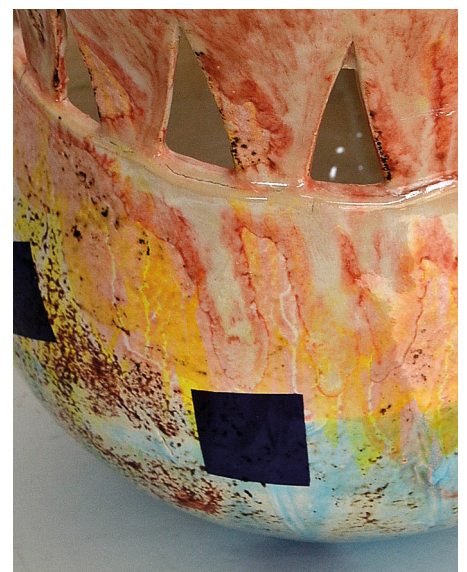
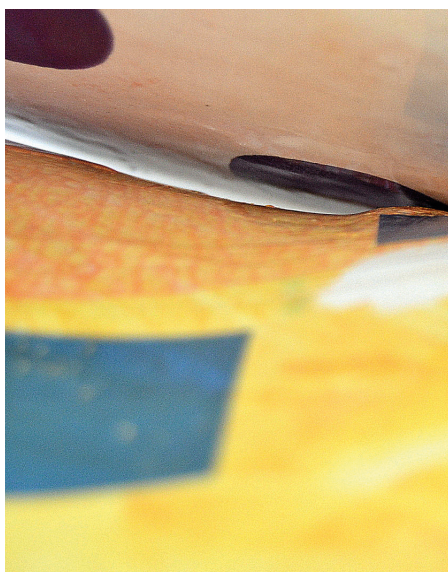
a skin of truncated magazine photographic cutouts featuring the human eye inside a triangle, all too known symbols of religion and superstition. Such a fusion of disparate elements imbues the table with expansive meaning that stretches the symbolic, historical and physical reference of the object across millennia, latching it to Ħaġar Qim's sacrificial altar on the one hand while on the other, alluding it to modern design through a generously playful decoration. The image of the eye, also directly referencing Horus's eye on the Maltese luzzu, is also extended to the irons or sails, objects which stand sturdily upright on three legs. Although complementing the modernist aesthetic of the tables, these artefacts have no utilitarian function and stare at the viewer through their heavily made-up, female eyes.

In further versions of these irons or sails, the artist 'blinds' these objects through substituting the images of the eyes with a structure of uniform polka dots, a device of embellishment which surfaced in fashion in the late 1920s and, similar to their use in the more formal wear of the 1950s, gives the objects an air of optimism and playfulness. This conscious intervention changes the meaning of the works and transports them into light-heartedness.

Tony Briffa's wall panels further strengthen this concern with function and ornament as points of tangible and conceptual departure. These grid-like, nine-square tile arrangements stress visual rhythm and balance, through an unfolding of spatial narrative that requires the viewer to focus on the single tile element as a complete entity, while also considering its value within the overall composition. In these works, the artist departs from his engagement with the three-dimensional form through a willful negation of physical depth, using solid flat colours and making sure that the photographic cutouts are visually read within the two-dimensional. Contrary to the sculptural works, these panels sustain the original function and purpose of wall tiles presenting the viewer with a dual reading that oscillates between artform and utilitarian object. These works present an intellectual challenge to the surface that bears them, be it within an art gallery or inversely in a domestic setting.

The exhibited works are clear evidence of the artist's constant juggling with the form-function paradigm. He intentionally upsets the objects' equilibrium and renders them unusable not only through change in size, but also through a further dissonant amalgamation of form and image, steering the process of evolution of the object into hybridity. The works therefore become far removed from the comfort of the original artefact turning into effigies that in fact question the very act and purpose of their own creation.

Vince Briffa





Tony Briffa (born 1959) studied ceramics with Gabriel Caruana in the late seventies. After almost ten years working in the ceramic industry, he was entrusted with the ceramic instruction at Targa Gap School of Art, Mosta. Since the early eighties, he participated in a significant number of national and international selective exhibitions, drawing the attention of the critical public. In 1995, he was awarded the Commonwealth Foundation Fellowship in Art and Crafts, which he later pursued at the Center for the Arts, Hobart, University of Tasmania. Marrying a Dane, he moved to Denmark in 2002 where he works and lives together with his wife, Jette and daughter, Nina. Tony was awarded the Pollock- Krasner Foundation Grant in 2015.

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